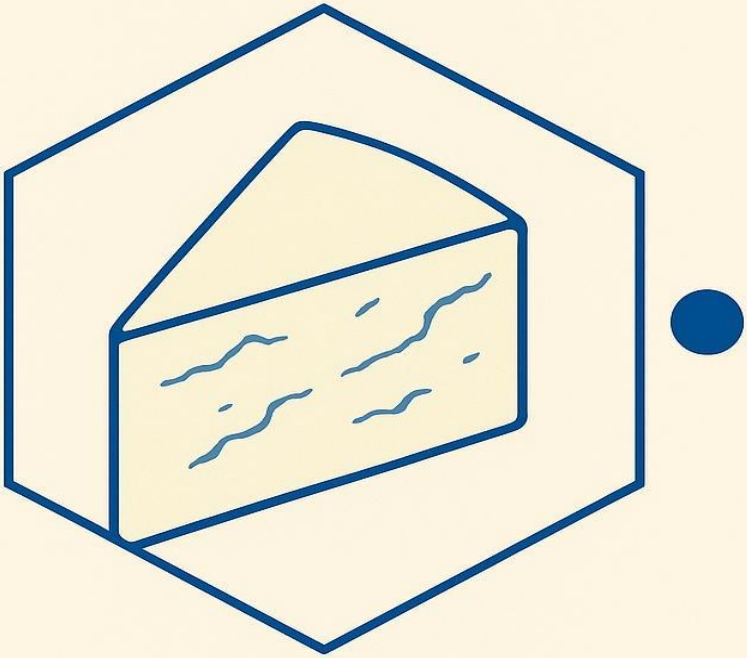
RELISH OF DISGUST, PUNGENT, FEETY SAVOUR



ALBA PRATALIA

RELISH OF DISGUST, PUNGENT, FEETY SAVOUR

Nathan was reading Cioran while drunk, which is, by all measures, the only correct way to read Cioran. Sober, he was too fragile; high, too philosophical; but drunk—ah, drunk he was exactly as miserable as the Romanian demanded.

He loved that Cioran could be read like a deck of tarot cards: open at random, pull out despair, shuffle again, draw more despair, all equally valid. The man had built an entire literary career on saying "life is pointless" in 14,000 different ways, and Nathan admired that kind of professional commitment.

Sometimes he'd start in the middle of a sentence and stop halfway through another book entirely. It didn't matter. Cioran had no beginnings or endings—only eternal hangovers. The paragraphs looped around like cigarette smoke in a closed room: beautiful, poisonous, and indistinguishable from one another.

Nathan took a long drink of something transparent and legally questionable, reread the same line three times, then skipped three pages forward. It still made sense. He could have dropped the book in the sink, picked it up again, and it would've read like an existential prophecy.

He smiled, drunk and philosophical, murmuring:

“Cioran, my man. You wrote the Bible for people who lost faith in punctuation.”

Then he fell asleep on the book, which was fine. Cioran would’ve approved.

Had it only been this easy with other writers. Cioran forgave distraction; Camus did not. You miss a comma in Camus and the whole absurd collapses like a flan in a cupboard. Nathan had to go back three times over the ending of *The Stranger* before it clicked that Meursault’s desire for a crowd at his execution wasn’t courage—it was the final joke. The cheerless punchline. The “meaning” of meaninglessness.

He had nodded slowly at that, bottle in hand, muttering, “Right, right. Crowd = void. Got it. I, too, want witnesses when nothing makes sense.”

But Dumas—ah, Dumas was another battlefield. Too many musketeers, too many counts, and every woman either named Anne or plotting to poison Anne. Nathan had resorted to pasting a literal map of characters onto the endpapers: red yarn, arrows, post-its. At one point it looked less like a novel aid and more like an FBI investigation into 17th-century French adultery.

All for his *prosopagnosia*, that delightful brain feature that turned every social encounter into a live-action guessing game. He had set the word "PROSOPAGNOSIA" as his phone wallpaper because, naturally, he couldn't remember what it was called. More than once he'd fished the phone from his pocket mid-conversation just to discreetly remind himself why he didn't recognize the person smiling at him.

He'd murmur, "Oh right, it's the thing," then nod earnestly to someone who could've been his dentist or his ex or a barista. "Good to see you again, champ."

Nathan could forget a face, a name, or an entire chapter of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, but never the existential pleasure of realizing how stupidly fragile his brain was.

Hemingway is another thing entirely. You can't get distracted reading Hemingway. The man writes like he's hammering nails into your skull: steady, clean, unavoidable. Your mind doesn't wander—it marches. You get anchored to that simple, crystal-clear, trench-mud prose and keep reading without even realizing you've been reading. You look up only when someone calls your name or the room has caught fire.

Then there's Bukowski. Openly, proudly, out-of-the-closet Hemingway disciple. Same stripped-down lucidity, just drunker, dirtier, and with far more biological fluids per page. You follow his prose like following a drunk genius home—you know it's a bad idea, but he keeps saying brilliant things while pissing in the sink.

Nathan adored that. The clarity of it all. Hemingway makes you drink whiskey in silence; Bukowski makes you spill it on someone and then write a poem about it. Both men, in their own way, had achieved the holy grail of writing: making self-destruction look productive.

He thought of them often—Hem, precise as a sniper; Buk, staggering but honest.
"Two sides of the same hangover," Nathan said

aloud to no one, raising his glass. “One kills bulls, the other kills boredom.”

He drank, reread a line about futility, and nodded.
At least with Cioran, he thought, you never had to pretend it ended well.

Bing-bong. The door. A courier.

Nathan shuffled over, still holding his glass like a philosopher’s chalice, and signed the little screen with the grace of a man tracing his own signature for the first time. Package in hand—rectangular, promising, sensual in its brown-paper anonymity. He stripped away the plastic as if undressing civilization. Ah yes. That sound. The dry whisper of brown paper surrendering.

Finally, they’d arrived: two thick, dignified bricks of madness and mirth—*The Complete*

Works of Edgar Allan Poe and *The Complete Works of P. G. Wodehouse.* A dangerous pairing, he thought. One chronicled humanity's descent into gothic despair; the other, golf.

Owning complete works was a bold, logistical suicide. They were heavy, immovable, like small altars to authorial obsession. You didn't *travel* with these—no, you *consulted* them. You built furniture around them. But Nathan loved the practicality of it: no chasing down random anthologies, no "best of" nonsense where the same story is renamed, retranslated, and reprinted seven times.

He'd learned that lesson from Borges. Dear, blind labyrinth-builder Borges. Nathan had finally hunted down the *Obras Completas* in three Emecé volumes—the holy trinity of

recursive thought. Now, when he wanted Borges, he knew exactly where to find him. It was like having a bottled infinity: *Vol. II, Page 143, Second Paragraph, Endless Mirror Reference—found it.*

He ran his hand over the covers of Poe and Wodehouse like a man touching two halves of his own brain: one dark, dripping, whispering "Nevermore," the other cheerfully suggesting cucumber sandwiches and golf handicaps.

Poe and Wodehouse. The abyss and the cocktail party.

Nathan smiled, lit a cigarette, and murmured, "Well, gentlemen… shall we ruin my sanity together?"

Bing-bong. Again.
Nathan stared at the door like it had just insulted his mother.

He opened it. Some kid stood there—couldn't have been more than twenty, eyes glowing with the lethal mix of fandom and misplaced purpose.

A normal person would have gone with *"Yes?"* or *"Can I help you?"*
Nathan: "Who the fuck are you?"

Some Kid: "From Instagram. We agreed on a one-to-one session. Here's your compensation."

He held up a thick envelope—so fat it had cellulite. It sagged with the promise of untraceable, high-denomination cash.

Nathan blinked. "One-on-one session… on *Instagram*? You mean *online*, with webcams, where both parties are legally required to be clothed only above the waist?"

Some Kid: “Yeah. So… why’d you give me your *address*, then?”

Nathan’s brain stuttered. “…I did what, now?”

Kid: “You said something about Poe and Wodehouse.”

Nathan’s inner monologue collapsed like a badly built bookshelf. “Oh shit.”

He rubbed his face. “Okay, okay, fine. Come on in. Liquors are on the—well, *everywhere*, really. Behind that chair, next to that dog, on top of *that* book about hangovers. Help yourself.”

The kid stepped in, cautious but intrigued, the way you enter the home of a mythological beast that also happens to have an OnlyFans account.

Nathan shut the door behind him. “You ever read Cioran?”

Kid: “No.”

Nathan: “Good. You’ll fit right in.”

Nathan: “So, what’s this about?”

The kid, confident as a YouTuber with nothing to lose, produced his phone and pressed play.

On the screen: Nathan himself, haloed by bad indie feel-well music, speaking directly to the camera with the sincerity of a man selling snake oil from a burning wagon.

“Tired of getting out of conversations because you don’t get the references but TL;DR? Follow me, my method will blow your mind. Contact via DM.”

Kid: “So, here I am. Blow my mind.”

Nathan blinked. “Oh, there’ll be blowing all right.”

He turned toward his *library*, if you could call it that—a geometric hallucination of knowledge. Twenty floor-to-ceiling bookshelves arranged hexagonally, five per wall, enclosing him like a monk of madness in Borges’s library. He ran his finger along a row, muttered “Let’s educate,” and hurled *The Ancestor Trilogy* by Calvino straight at the kid’s shoulder.

The kid yelped.

Then came *Taras Bulba*. *THWACK.*
Then *To the Lighthouse. SMACK.*
Then *Germinal. WHUD.*
Then *The New York Trilogy. POW.*

It was *Bookstorm 2025*.

The kid crouched, shielding himself, as paperbacks rained like judgment.

Nathan roared, "TL;DR, huh? 'Tis Long; Do Read! Get a fucking culture, you illiterate generation of serotonin-deprived skimmers!"

He lobbed *Lolita* next—*perfect aim*, square to the crotch. The boy folded. And before mercy could be invented, Nathan sent *Finnegans Wake* flying, spinning end over end like a sacred projectile, landing *bang* on the forehead.

A goose-egg of pure flow of consciusness blossomed instantly.

The kid collapsed to the carpet, stunned, whispering: "What… what did you just do to me?"

Nathan leaned down, lit a cigarette, exhaled a thin ghost of nicotine and irony.
"Congratulations," he said. "You've been Joyce-pilled."

Nathan: "Now go to the kitchen," he said, flicking ash like punctuation, "and make yourself a gorgonzola sandwich with a glass of Burgundy. Use mustard. I also have Italian olives and a Spanish onion. After you're done—if you can tell me *what you just ate*—you might make it out of here with all your teeth."

The kid blinked. "Wait··· what?"

Nathan pointed toward the kitchen with the smoldering cigarette like a general directing artillery. "Go, Bloom, go."

The kid hesitated, then trudged off, disappearing behind the wall of books into the

dim galley kitchen that smelled like books and defeat.

Nathan poured himself another drink. He didn't explain the test. He didn't mention Joyce. No one *explains* Joyce—you either drown in him or you float because you're too stupid to sink.

He watched through the doorway as the kid rummaged through the fridge, found the cheese (a dubious, sweating wedge of blue-veined gorgonzola), the mustard, the olives, the onion, the wine. Nathan could hear the clatter of plates, the desperate confusion of someone trying to perform a ritual without knowing the god it's meant for.

Finally, the kid emerged with a sandwich that looked like something made by a poet having a breakdown.

He bit into it.

The gorgonzola hit first—fetid, glorious, primordial. Then the mustard—sharp, stinging, alive. The olives cut through the salt like punctuation marks in a foreign sentence. The wine followed, red and tragic.

He chewed, swallowed, frowned. “It tastes like… like…”

Nathan leaned forward, eyes narrowing, a slow grin spreading. “Careful now.”

“…like a cemetery at lunchtime?” the kid ventured.

Nathan raised his glass. “Close enough.”

He sipped, satisfied. “Bloom would’ve hired you as an understudy.”

The kid looked lost. “Who’s Bloom?”

Nathan sighed. “My son, we have *so much suffering ahead of us.*”

A few days later, Nathan had the kid right where he wanted him: eight shots of tequila deep, face red as a Dostoevsky confession, slurring into the carpet about Anna Karenina climbing from tree to tree in Sanremo, trying to find Orlando’s wits while defending a marlin carcass from sharks.

He was making progress.

The kid, days ago, was pure algorithm—TikTok-brained, dopamine-looped, unable to sustain a thought longer than a vape puff. Now he was *hallucinating literature*. A chaotic stew of Tolstoy, Hemingway, Joyce, and Ariosto leaking from his mouth like a divine parody.

Nathan sat across the table, elbows on knees, watching him with paternal pride. “There it is,”

he whispered. “The moment the brain melts and the canon seeps in.”

The kid pointed vaguely at nothing. “Anna said... said Bloom can’t find his cheese.”

Nathan nodded gravely. “Yes. Yes, that’s *intertextual despair*. Keep going.”

“Then... then Orlando... she found it. Under a horse. The horse was Russian. It spoke Italian.”

Nathan wiped a tear. “Magnificent. He’s finally bilingual in delusion.”

He poured another shot into the kid’s trembling glass and raised his own.
“To progress,” Nathan toasted. “From reels to realism.”

The kid tried to clink glasses, missed by a meter, and fell asleep mid–Tolstoy reference.

Nathan leaned back, lit a cigarette, and exhaled smoke like punctuation.
"Another one saved from the algorithm," he muttered. "Next week, we do Proust. With absinthe."

Nathan threw the kid out the other week. Literally. The doorframe still had a dent in the shape of naïveté.

He'd gone soft for a moment, watching the boy shuffle down the street in a wrinkled T-shirt that read 'Tis Long; Do Read, clutching his battered copy of *Howl* like scripture. A worn Panama hat sat crooked on his head—somewhere between Kerouac cosplay and failed archaeology intern.

There was, Nathan admitted, an illusion of hope dangling there. The kid had come a long way from the day he mistook *Poe and*

Wodehouse for OnlyFans categories. Now he was quoting Ginsberg, slurring through metaphors, and misusing semicolons with conviction.

Nathan lit a cigarette, watching the figure shrink down the street until it blurred into heat and exhaust. “Go forth,” he muttered, “and misinterpret everything.”

He poured himself another drink, turned to his hexagonal library, and smiled faintly. Somewhere between *Ulysses* and *Howl*, the algorithm had lost one of its own.

For the first time in years, Nathan allowed himself a flicker of optimism—
then immediately poured more whiskey to drown it.

Nathan, hand still on the doorknob, watched the scene unfold with the silent reverence one

reserves for natural disasters and family therapy.

From the neighbor's house came a procession that looked like a Dostoevsky chapter staged by Fellini: the wife in front, dragging two kids and a dog, assisted by the maid—an Amazon of logistics—stacking luggage, toys, and marital debris into a dented '97 Honda Civic that whimpered under the weight of collective disappointment.

On the doorstep stood the husband, glowing like a man who had just successfully sneezed after three days of nasal suspense. His face was beatific. Enlightened. Free.
He was speaking, apparently, to a man who looked like he had been lured there under false architectural pretenses.

“You see, architect,” said the husband with a kind of evangelical calm, “it’s all a chain of affections that neither you nor I can break. You love my wife, my wife is terribly fond of Birillo. Birillo adores the little girls. And the little girls are deeply attached to the governess…”

The architect’s face twitched. “The governess?!”

“German,” continued the husband, as though announcing a brand of washing machine. “Two-year contract. Very strict. Always in uniform. In short, whoever takes Donatella takes the whole package.”

The architect looked like a man who had just cleaned his entire garage only to open the garden shed and find it full of unsorted karma, broken promises, and sharp, pointy tools labeled *responsibility*.

Nathan, transfixed, muttered into his drink: "Tolstoy was right. Every unhappy family *is* unhappy in its own way··· and some even have export options."

He watched Birillo jump into the Civic, tail wagging like the flag of a newly independent state. The wife slammed the trunk, the governess barked something in German that sounded legally binding, and the car pulled away in a cloud of liberation and burnt oil.

The neighbor exhaled, closed his door, and leaned against it—radiant, reborn, like a saint of domestic exorcism.

Nathan raised his glass toward him from across the fence. "Congratulations, brother," he said softly. "You sneezed out a family."

Nathan remembered what his Brazilian friend once said, somewhere between a caipirinha and a confession:

"I'd like to meet the man who invented marriage. Imagine saying, *I love you so much I want God and the government to get involved.*"

Nathan had laughed so hard he almost dropped his drink. Because yes—only humanity could turn affection into a three-party legal arrangement with paperwork and witnesses.

But then, Nathan thought, there was that husband. The husband of *her*—the lady to whom Nathan had once, with patience and pedagogy, taught the sacred mechanics of swallowing. That poor bastard must have felt the divine calling and said:

"You suck dick so well that I want both God *and* the government to bind us canonically and legally."

And so he did.

She, dutiful and strategic, kept the man happy once a year, a ritualized act performed on his birthday like renewing a driver's license. Not out of passion, but practicality. Keep the husband's serotonin stable, the bank accounts accessible, and the beach house hers for the summer.

The rest of the year, Nathan got the extracurriculars. He'd refined her skills like a sommelier of vice, instructing not for his own pleasure—he already had that—but out of a faint moral sense that the husband, at least on his one annual night, deserved a slightly improved experience.

That, Nathan thought, was his version of philanthropy. Not the Red Cross—just oral refinement for the preservation of bourgeois marriage.

He took a sip of whiskey, stared out the window, and smirked. “We all serve society in our own ways.”